

Laina At the Movies, August, 2010  
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FAREWELL. I am recommending a movie that you might only be able to get on Netflix because it has come and will go with little notice. The reason to notice it is that not only is this a true story, but an important piece of Cold War history that we all need to understand.

The film is set in April, 1981, at a time that the US and USSR came the closest to outright conflict since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ronald Reagan was president, and Francois Mitterrand had just been elected to the presidency in France.

A little background not covered in this film: we came so close to nuclear war that President Reagan sent two members of his administration, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, to go into retreat and work out a plan to restart the government in the event of a nuclear conflict. The process changed these two men forever\227making both of them fiercely hard-line.

In the film, a KGB colonel, Sergei Grigoriev, has become not only disenchanted by the stagnant and oppressive nature of his country that he, as a real Russian patriot, has decided that Russia must change if it were to survive.

He finds a young French engineer, Pierre Froment, living in Moscow, a civilian (selected because he was under the KGB radar) to transmit Soviet intelligence to the West. We watch the growing relationship of these two very different men on a very dangerous quest\227and also see the affect of their actions on their wives and children.

Reagan, who initially suspected that Mitterrand was a Marxist, soon learns how good a friend the French actually were. And the intelligence that Mitterrand shares with Regan changed the Cold War forever\227and paved the way to end it\227thanks to the wisdom of Gorbachev and\227yes\227Reagan, who surprised us all.

This is an intelligent movie and is very engrossing. We do end up caring about all the people in it\227and the heroism of those who do the right thing despite the cost.

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AGORA. This is another film that is being neglected this summer but deserves to be seen. It is the story of what was going on in Roman Egypt at the end of the 4th century\227a period of as much religious ferment as the much later 17th century Europe and today. Although there seems to be some bias in the film against the rising tide of Christians, they were no more violent than any of the other players at the time (Jews and Pagans) and it is obvious that even after the Christians prevailed, they would begin fighting among themselves.

The film follows the life of a most remarkable woman living in Alexandria, Hypathia, who was a philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician. At a time that women were not permitted any sort of freedom, she was fortunate enough to have a very wealthy and liberal father who recognized her genius and declined to marry her off against her will.

She taught philosophy and astronomy to a group of elite young men\227antiquity\227s version of a university or academy. The puzzle that obsessed her was that Ptolomy\227s theory of the cosmos, the accepted theory of the day, that the cosmos was earth centric. This theory failed to explain some observable anomalies such as earth\227s different distances from the sun throughout the year and the erratic behavior of some of the planets.

While she was an atheist believer in reason, her city of Alexandria was roiling amidst religious fanaticism. The Pagan elites took umbrage at the Christian insults and attacks on their gods and decided to get even. To their horror, they miscalculated and didn\227t realize that the once persecuted Christian minority were now the majority\227and were prepared for mayhem. The Jews, who had been engaged in a three-century battle with Christianity (a rival cult, they thought) also failed to see that the Christians had become the majority and would get revenge.

When religious violence broke out, the Roman authorities were not able to quell it. Roman soldiers and officials themselves had been quietly converting to Christianity. Some officials saw such conversion as having political value to them.

What the film shows is what happens when the tide turns and a formerly disdained

group takes power. While the film hints at why people were converting to Christianity (feeding the poor and caring for the sick\227which Roman pagans did not do), it also showed what happens when a downtrodden group takes power. They became monsters of bigotry and did what all fanatical religions do first\227take any sort of power or prestige away from women.

The clash of this triumphal Christian majority with the brilliant woman philosopher had to end as it did\227with the lights of ancient learning going out.

This is a wonderful film visually, and the acting of Rachel Weisz as Apathia, Max Minghella as her brilliant slave, Oscar Isaac as her devoted former student and now Roman official, and Sami Samir as the evil Bishop Cyril, and others in this excellent film, are well worth seeing.

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NANNY MCPHEE RETURNS. Emma Thompson, a wonderful British actress, has written the screenplay and starred in the role of a magical nanny with the extraordinary ability to take on children in need of civilizing (the duty of good parenting, no?). This is a second film about this remarkable nanny, both stories based on a favorite childrens\222 book series by Christianna Brand: Nurse Matilda.

You do not have to take a child or grandchild to see and enjoy this film. The humor is delicious, the values what I wish we would have more of, and it is perfect summer entertainment. A child, however, will love it and may\227with luck\227come out a little more civilized.